

right to vote for just short of a century. It is important that citizens, both women and men, do not take for granted their right to be heard. For this reason, it is fitting that we honor the League of Women Voters of Las Vegas Valley as their work offers each new generation the reminder that civic engagement has been, and continues to be, one of the most important rights we have as we strive to make our community and our country a better place to live. I applaud and celebrate with the League of Women Voters of Las Vegas Valley on their 50th anniversary.

MARRIAGE EQUALITY IN VERMONT

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, today I am particularly proud of my home State, as we commemorate the fifth anniversary of the passage of Vermont's law guaranteeing marriage equality.

Throughout history, Vermont has taken a leadership role in America's journey to build a more just society. Vermont was the first State in the Union to outlaw slavery, and Vermonters offered shelter to runaway slaves seeking refuge while in transit to Canada—serving as one of the last stops on the Underground Railroad. Vermont was also the first to adopt universal manhood suffrage, regardless of property ownership.

It is because of this history that it is not surprising that Vermont has been at the forefront of our Nation's march toward marriage equality: Vermont was the first State to provide civil unions to same-sex couples back in 2000. On April 7, 2009, Vermont took the next step, overriding a veto to pass legislation affording marriage equality to all Vermonters in loving relationships who wanted their commitment recognized by the State. Once again Vermont led the Nation by granting marriage equality for the first time through democratically elected officials on a bipartisan basis, instead of through the courts.

This is not to say that it was easy. The initial move toward civil unions fomented heated debate among Vermonters and throughout the Nation. Several courageous leaders, such as the late Republican U.S. Senator from Vermont Bob Stafford, and State Representatives Bill Lippert and Marion Milne, among others, showed us the way, and their advocacy for equality was powerfully moving. Like many Vermonters, I listened to advocates, friends, and neighbors who reminded us that love and commitment are values to encourage and not to fear. I continue to be inspired by the inclusive example set by Vermont.

Now, 5 years later, 3,766 same-sex couples have married in the State of Vermont, 17 States and the District of Columbia have marriage equality, and the Supreme Court has decided a landmark case on the issue of same-sex marriage. In that case—United States

v. Windsor—the Court struck down Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act, which defined marriage for purposes of Federal law as “only a legal union between one man and one woman.” The Court reasoned that the law deprived couples of equal liberty as protected by our Fifth Amendment. All Americans deserve equal justice under the law, and Marcelle and I, married for more than 50 years, celebrated this important decision, which pushed the Nation farther on its path toward equality.

As chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, I have long worked to make civil rights a focal point of our committee's agenda and a priority in the Senate. I often hear from those who think that the struggle for civil rights is over—that this issue is one for the history books. I remind them that this is our recent history and that while we have made great strides, there is still much work to be done. The march toward equality must continue until all individuals—regardless of sexual orientation, gender or gender identity, race, ethnicity, religion, or disability—are protected and respected, equally, under our laws. I am confident that Vermont will continue to lead the way, and I am proud of all that we have already accomplished.

SEXUAL ASSAULT AWARENESS AND PREVENTION MONTH

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, April is Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month, and it is an important reminder of the ongoing problem of sexual assault in our nation.

The Violence Against Women Act, VAWA, which first passed in 1994, has had an astounding impact on reducing sexual and domestic assault in our country. The annual incidence of domestic violence has dropped more than 50 percent since VAWA became law. This groundbreaking bipartisan legislation included many provisions critical to supporting and improving services for all victims of sexual assault and ensuring that law enforcement has the tools it needs to find and prosecute perpetrators. I was proud to author the Leahy-Crapo Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, which was signed into law by President Obama last year.

The Leahy-Crapo Violence Against Women Act built upon past successes and expanded its protections to more inclusive to the victims most at risk of domestic violence and sexual assault, including LGBT, Native American, and immigrant victims. One aspect of this important effort that did not receive much attention is how it increased focus on sexual assault prevention, enforcement, and services to encourage reporting. It also increased support for programs that improve law enforcement and forensic responses to sexual assault and to address backlogs of untested rape kits. These improvements, along with the many others made in

the reauthorization, will continue to advance the national response to sexual assault.

Our bipartisan effort last year is making lives better today, but there is much more we must do. The National Network to End Domestic Violence, in their annual National Domestic Violence Counts Census, found that every day 9,000 service requests go unmet because of a lack of resources. This is not acceptable. Every day tens of thousands of victims turn to domestic and sexual violence services providers for support through emergency safe shelters, legal assistance, and child support groups, and we must do all we can to ensure these needs are met.

We cannot stop by simply supporting a strong VAWA law. That is why I was proud to support the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act, which included historic reforms to sexual assault prevention and response within the military. I was also heartened last month when the Senate came together to pass the Victims Protection Act of 2014 by a vote of 97 to 0. This legislation takes even greater steps to encourage military servicemembers to come forward and report sexual assault. As I have said many times, a victim, is a victim, is a victim. We must protect all victims, including our Nation's service men and women, and that means working to decrease the fear of stigma or inaction that can often deter reporting.

Following the reauthorization of VAWA, the passage of the NDAA, and the Victims Protection Act, I hope the Senate will soon approve the bipartisan Justice for All Act reauthorization that I authored with Senator JOHN CORNYN. I was proud to author the original legislation, and our reauthorization includes many critical provisions for victims. Importantly, our bill reauthorizes the Debbie Smith DNA Backlog Grant Program, which seeks to reduce the backlog of untested rape kits and other DNA evidence. This program is named after Debbie Smith, who waited years after being attacked before her rape kit was tested and the perpetrator was caught. Every Senate Democrat has cleared the way for passage the bipartisan Justice For All Act reauthorization, and I hope Senate Republicans will act quickly so we can pass this measure that means so much to rape survivors and all victims of crime.

I applaud the tireless work of the many advocates who work on behalf of victims each day and thank them for their dedication to this critical problem. Together we have taken significant steps to ensure victims of sexual assault have access to the services they need to rebuild their lives, that law enforcement have the tools they need to prosecute those who commit these horrific crimes, and to reduce future incidences of sexual assault through education and prevention efforts. Last year, the Senate stood up for the survivors of rape by passing the Leahy-

Crapo Violence Against Women Act reauthorization. Today, as we mark Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention month, I hope Senate Republicans will join Senate Democrats to stand with them again by passing the Leahy-Cornyn Justice For All Act.

TRIBUTE TO SERGEANT JESSE T. WETHINGTON

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, this past Saturday, April 5, I was extremely pleased and honored to be a part of the awarding of the Purple Heart Medal to a brave soldier Kentucky is proud to call one of its own. SGT Jesse T. Wethington of Liberty, KY, received his Purple Heart for wounds suffered while serving our country in Iraq. I want to share the honor and majesty of this event with my colleagues and so therefore ask unanimous consent that the full text of my remarks at the ceremony to award SGT Jesse T. Wethington his Purple Heart, as well as the text of the proclamation for the Purple Heart be printed in the RECORD following my remarks.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

SENATOR MCCONNELL'S REMARKS AT AWARDING OF PURPLE HEART TO SERGEANT JESSE T. WETHINGTON, APRIL 5, 2014

Thank you for that kind introduction. Thank you, General Dolan, for the invocation. It is my great honor to be here for the presentation of the Purple Heart Medal to Sergeant Jesse T. Wethington of Liberty, Kentucky, for wounds received in action while in service to our country in Iraq. It is an honor that is long overdue.

Because we are here to recognize the service of a brave soldier, it is fitting to be at VFW Post 1170. I want to thank our hosts, led by VFW Post Commander Dwight Riggle. I also want to thank VFW State Commander Joe Schnitterbaum and VFW leaders Brian Duffy and Carl Kaelin for all they have done in support of America's veterans.

It's a pleasure to have Chris Smrt and the Kentucky chapter of the Military Order of the Purple Heart here today to welcome Sergeant Wethington into their ranks. Chris and the Military Order of the Purple Heart, like the VFW, are strong advocates for our veterans.

And on this day when we're honoring a Kentucky Guardsman, it's wonderful to see so many Kentucky Guard soldiers and airmen here today, including our outstanding Adjutant General, Ed Tonini.

Finally, I'd like to welcome the folks who came here from Jesse's hometown of Liberty, including Jesse's wife, Ashley; his daughter, Hannah; his mother, Gayle; Jesse's brother, Chris, and Chris's wife, Dorothy; Jesse's mother-in-law, Mrs. Hope Metz; and Liberty VFW Post Commander and former State VFW Commander Claude Wyatt. Welcome to VFW Post 1170.

The original Purple Heart, also known as the Badge of Military Merit, was established by George Washington himself, and as such, the Purple Heart is the oldest existing military award that is still given to servicemembers.

I think the commander of the Continental Army and our first president can speak better than I to the courage and bravery which this award represents. In July of 1776, at the outbreak of the War for Independence, Gen-

eral Washington wrote in his own hand the weight of the task that had befallen him and his army. He said:

"The fate of unborn millions will now depend, upon God, on the courage and conduct of this Army . . . we have therefore to resolve to conquer or die. . . . Let us therefore rely upon the goodness of the cause, and the aid of the Supreme Being, in whose hands victory is, to animate and encourage us to great and noble actions. The eyes of all our countrymen are now upon us."

That same patriotism—that same Spirit of '76—which was embodied by the leader of the Revolutionary Army lives on today in those in uniform such as Jesse. Perhaps that is inevitable in Jesse's case, given that he hails from a place called Liberty, a town founded by Revolutionary War veterans in 1806.

Although warfare has changed dramatically since the Revolutionary Era, the valor of our warfighters, such as Jesse, remains the same. That valor would have been instantly recognizable to George Washington.

It is the same valor that propelled Americans to victory against the mighty British Empire. The same valor that propelled Americans to die for other men's freedoms in the Civil War. The same valor we remember in the Greatest Generation, men and women who sacrificed halfway around the globe to save democracy. The same valor displayed in Cold War conflicts in Korea and Vietnam.

Sergeant Wethington's service is simply the latest chapter in a long and unbroken line of heroism and sacrifice, a line that is as old as our country.

The story of Jesse Wethington, the soldier from Liberty, is like that of those who served in the Revolutionary War—it is the story of a volunteer. Jesse could have chosen any number of paths, paths that would not have involved protecting "the fate of unborn millions," paths that would not have placed him in imminent danger.

Instead, Jesse volunteered to serve in the Kentucky Army National Guard. He volunteered to go on the road in a Humvee that would be targeted by the enemy in Iraq. He volunteered to sit in the gunner's turret. And even after his injury in combat, Jesse volunteered again to sit right back in that gunner's turret through the end of his tour of duty.

Jesse was mobilized with Battery B, First Battalion, 623rd Field Artillery of the Kentucky Army National Guard in late 2004, and he deployed to Iraq in January 2005. He served as a communications specialist and worked in the tactical operations center at the forward operating base.

In his communications role, Jesse had a view of his entire unit's activities. He saw the gun trucks and Humvees that deployed every day, and how often they were targeted by the enemy's IEDs. He saw good men, friends of his, injured. He saw the deaths of three soldiers in his unit, Kentuckians all.

Knowing these things, knowing all the risks involved, Jesse still volunteered. And when a spot opened up in a gun truck, Jesse stepped forward and said, "Send me." Jesse volunteered yet again to serve as a gunner. He encountered several IEDs on the road, but always came away uninjured. Until the fateful day of September 30, 2005.

On that day, Jesse's Humvee was moving slowly through congested traffic as part of a convoy. It stopped, and Jesse stood up in the gunner's hatch to direct traffic. Suddenly, an IED struck the right side of the truck with devastating force. The impact from the blast was so great it sent shrapnel hurdling through the back window, just missing Jesse's right leg and embedding itself into a storage bin within the Humvee.

Jesse suffered injury to his throat and the back of his head. After the explosion, he

could not hear, and his vision and thoughts were blurred. Yet, amazingly, he continued his mission. Upon returning to the base, Jesse received medical care, and after a few days of light duty returned to the gunner's turret. He finished out his tour of duty through the end of the year and returned from Iraq in January 2006.

Unfortunately, Jesse's departure from the battlefield didn't end his struggles. He suffered traumatic brain injury, hearing loss, and post-traumatic stress disorder, and he is continually confronted by the effects of his injuries.

Through all these difficulties, I know Jesse's greatest source of strength and support is his family, especially, Ashley and Hannah.

Coincidentally, the very same day Jesse found out he would be receiving this Purple Heart, he and Ashley also discovered they would be having a baby boy. It is entirely fitting that news of both events arrived on the same day, given Jesse's valor in defending the "fate of unborn millions."

Before the presentation of the Purple Heart Medal, I want to note that there is another hero in this story. It's Jesse's friend and fellow soldier, retired Staff Sergeant Glen Phillips, who we heard from earlier this morning.

It was Staff Sergeant Phillips who gathered the facts in order for Jesse to receive his Purple Heart today. Glen, who is also from Liberty, has helped look out for Jesse and many other veterans over the years.

When Jesse told Glen he didn't think anyone would care that he had yet to receive his Purple Heart, this is what Glen had to say: "Jesse, I care, the VA cares, the U.S. Army cares, and people you don't even know care across this great land."

I couldn't agree more. I think the witnesses here today for this solemn occasion are proof positive that Kentucky does indeed care and cares deeply about you, Jesse, and your bravery in uniform. And we are grateful for all you have done and continue to do to make us proud.

And I believe that many people who are not present today—including, one day, your son—will see how you served in Iraq with dignity and honor, will see that you continue to carry yourself with dignity and honor here at home, and will see the Purple Heart proclamation of your heroism. And they too will be moved by your service and your sacrifice.

The presentation of this Purple Heart Medal is just a small recognition of the wealth of respect you deserve for your service to our country. Your service in protecting all of us. And your service to the values that make America the greatest nation on earth—values expressed by General Washington and the men who founded a place called Liberty more than two centuries ago.

Now, the solemn moment we're gathered here today for has arrived. Sergeant Jesse T. Wethington, Ashley, and Hannah—please join me for the reading of the proclamation and the presentation of the Purple Heart Medal.

TEXT OF PURPLE HEART MEDAL PROCLAMATION

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To All Who Shall See These Presents, Greeting:

This is to Certify That the President of the United States of America Has Awarded the PURPLE HEART

Established by General George Washington At Newburgh, New York, August 7, 1782 to: Specialist Jesse T. Wethington United States Army

For Wounds Received in Action

On 30 September 2005 in Iraq

Given Under my Hand in the City of Washington